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SUBJECT: APCSS OUTREACH SEMINAR IN BRUNEI

¶1. SUMMARY: A four-day disaster management workshop co-sponsored by the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS) attracted Cabinet-level support from the Government of Brunei (GOB), widespread participation from over two dozen GOB agencies, and extensive media coverage. Participants produced a set of specific objectives aimed at significantly increasing the GOB capability to respond effectively to national disasters, both domestically and regionally via multilateral operations. An improved GOB capability to inter-operate effectively with USPACOM forces in combined disaster relief operations will be one of the positive effects of this APCSS outreach event; it also paid dividends as a practical example of the ongoing USG commitment to an active and constructive partnership with this Muslim-majority country and the Southeast Asian region. END SUMMARY.

¶2. APCSS and Brunei's National Disaster Management Center (NDMC) co-sponsored a disaster management workshop in Brunei from July 30 to August 2. The primary objectives were to further develop a strategic plan for disaster management within Brunei and facilitate improved command, control, and coordination by the Government of Brunei (GOB) in the event of a disaster striking the country. This was the first APCSS outreach event in Brunei.

¶3. The idea of APCSS partnering with the GOB on an outreach event was initially discussed by Deputy Minister of Defense Pehin Yasmin and APCSS Director LTG (Ret.) Ed Smith during the Director's visit to Brunei last year. Yasmin suggested a workshop on disaster management as an appropriate topic, and helped to arrange for the Ministry of Home Affairs and NDMC to act as co-sponsors given their lead responsibility for disaster management within the GOB.

¶4. The timing for the workshop proved fortuitous. The NDMC was just beginning to find its footing after its establishment several months ago. Only a week earlier it had coped with its first real-life small-scale disaster, a severe wind and rain storm that damaged nearly 200 houses in Bandar Seri Begawan's "water village" of structures built over the Brunei River, and left many families homeless. GOB officials were left with a keener appreciation of the challenges inherent in disaster management as a result of that event, and so were highly motivated to use the workshop to share the lessons they had learned and improve the government's response capability.

¶5. APCSS recruited an impressive roster of international facilitators and disaster management specialists for the workshop from the ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management, Pacific Disaster Center, a private consultancy, and APCSS itself. NDMC brought in 49 Bruneian participants from 26 government agencies (including a niece of the Sultan who is attached to the Foreign Ministry, where her father, Prince Mohamed, is Minister). The Minister of Home Affairs, Ambassador, and APCSS Director Smith all spoke at the opening of the workshop, signaling the high level of support that it received from both governments. Local media provided extensive coverage.

¶6. After four days of presentations and team-based game scenarios, Bruneian participants agreed on three major findings and 30

"next-step" objectives. The three general findings were that disaster management must be a priority commitment of the GOB at all levels; support for this effort was required from the whole of government, with NDMC taking the lead; and, resources applied to this effort had to be targeted based on an agreed set of priorities.

The specific objectives fell under the categories of identifying vulnerabilities, sharing information, improving intra-government collaboration, and expanding international coordination. They ranged from immediate creation of a multi-agency action planning team to construction of a national disaster management command center in the GOB's 08-09 fiscal year, and included recommendations for increased participation in regional disaster management exercises held under the auspices of ASEAN and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

¶7. Beyond the agreement on findings and objectives, the most significant outcome of the workshop may prove to be the attitudinal shift among its Bruneian participants. Although the NMDC was originally conceived as an inter-agency coordinating body, in reality it had been little more than a branch of the GOB Fire and Rescue Department. By building on the cooperation forged during the recent storm and highlighting the need for a whole-of-government approach, the workshop accelerated the process of transforming the NDMC into a true government-wide lead agency for disaster response. The NDMC Director pointedly addressed his closing remarks to the GOB "disaster response community," and went on to say that only a week earlier he would not have been able to use those words, since such a "community" did not exist until APCSS and the workshop it co-sponsored had facilitated its creation.

¶8. Comment: This APCSS outreach event produced several positive effects. The GOB and USG have already worked together in a relief operation, in Aceh following the December 2004 tsunami, and the process of upgrading GOB disaster management skills and response capabilities that began with this workshop will have a direct impact on the ability of the GOB to inter-operate effectively with U.S. forces in similar combined disaster relief operations in the future.

In addition, this commitment of time and effort by a DOD-sponsored institution was a powerful symbol of the USG commitment to an active and constructive partnership with this Muslim-majority country and with the ASEAN region. Embassy commends and thanks APCSS for a job exceedingly well done. End Comment.

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